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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000974

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SUBJECT: DEFMIN MURR FRUSTRATED WITH HARIRI BUT SAYS
"THERE'S NO ONE BETTER"

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Caretaker Minister of Defense Elias Murr told the Ambassador on August 28 that the Lebanese cannot expect "better than Saad Hariri these days." However, he continued, Prime Minister-designate Hariri needs to be viewed as "strong." Murr assessed that the planned August 31 meeting of majority MPs would help Hariri if he took immediate steps afterwards to move the government formation process forward. Murr, who confirmed that he expects to remain in the next cabinet, voiced support for UNSCR 1701. UNIFIL under Italian leadership has performed well, in Murr's view, and he plans to encourage his Italian counterpart to maintain Italy's level of support for the UNIFIL mission. An Israeli "soldier" who had crossed the Blue Line earlier in the week and was detained by the LAF was returned to Israel through UNIFIL on Murr's orders. While Murr underscored his value as a key player to whatever government Hariri may form, his political influence on other independents or on Hariri is unclear. End summary.

MAJORITY MPS TO
MEET, BUT THEN WHAT?

2. (C) Caretaker Defense Minister Elias Murr assured the Ambassador, DCM and Poloff on August 28 that he was encouraging the participation of key MPs in a planned meeting of the parliamentary majority called for by Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri on August 31. Murr, although not an MP himself, said he had urged both Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Murr's father, independent MP Michel Murr, to attend the gathering to bolster Hariri. He added that his interests in ensuring Hariri was perceived as "strong" were twofold: first, because Hariri is his friend, and second, because the Lebanese cannot expect "better than Saad these days."

3. (C) However, Murr was worried that there was no plan in place to move the government formation process forward after the August 31 meeting. He believed Hariri would need to act "immediately" afterwards and present a list of names for

cabinet positions to President Michel Sleiman within days to avoid squandering the momentum created by "the meeting of 71." (Note: Hariri's parliamentary majority, including independents, won 71 out of 128 MP seats in the June 7 election. End note.) The draft proposal could include 27 names, Murr posited, including Hariri's names for 15 seats, the president's names for five seats, the names of five Shia ministers agreed upon by Hizballah and Nabih Berri's Amal party, space for one minister to be named by the Armenian party Tashnaq, space for one minister to be named by opposition Christian party Marada leader Suleiman Franjieh, and three blank spaces for Hariri's Christian rival Michel Aoun. Doing so would show Hariri is prepared to form a government and would allow President Sleiman to assist in breaking the logjam with Aoun, Murr emphasized. Yet no such plan was in place, he fretted. While a meeting of all 71 MPs could negatively impact President Sleiman by showing that the president did not have even one MP in his informal bloc, Murr analyzed, Sleiman's credibility was suffering greater damage because there was no government at all. Murr cautioned that Hariri would not get another opportunity to have all of the MPs convened in the future should he "fumble" the follow-up to this meeting. (Note: 67 of the 71 expected MPs attended the meeting. Two of the absent MPs were on travel, while, significantly, the two key Tripoli Sunni MPs, Najib Mikati and Ahmad Karami, did not attend. End note.)

TO STAY AT DEFENSE OR
MOVE TO FOREIGN AFFAIRS?

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14. (C) Murr claimed that he expects to return as defense minister in the next cabinet, although he reported that Hariri and Sleiman also offered him the foreign affairs portfolio, which he would be willing to accept. Murr, wrapping himself in his cloak as the most senior Greek Orthodox in the government, said that he told both Sleiman and Hariri that his participation in the next government would be conditional upon his regaining his former position as deputy prime minister, as well -- a position that he held twice in the past, once during Najib Mikati's government from April-July 2005 and subsequently from 2005-2008 while Fouad Siniora was PM. Murr explained his value as a credible interlocutor in Middle East peace discussions, which he expected to take place in the coming year. Aside from his experience as defense minister, he would bring a neutrality that no Shia -- such as current FM Fawzi Salloukh, an ally of Amal head Nabih Berri -- could offer in order to negotiate "with a free hand to the benefit of Lebanon." Lebanon, he assessed, needs to be among the Arab countries deciding what a peace deal with Israel would look like, rather than being left behind.

MURR URGES CONTINUED
ITALIAN SUPPORT FOR UNIFIL

15. (C) Murr complimented Italian leadership and troop contributions to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) and explained that he and Lebanese Ambassador to Italy Melhem Mistou are developing an approach to the GOI to request extension of UNIFIL Commander General Claudio Graziano's assignment beyond January 2010 and maintenance of Italy's UNIFIL battalion at its current 2200 soldiers. The Italians "have to stay, it would be better for everyone," Murr insisted, citing his concern that if Italy reduced its troop contribution, other European countries would do the same. UNIFIL and UNSCR 1701 were "working well," Murr assessed. If Graziano's tour could not be extended, Murr said, he would support the Spanish taking the leadership position, but would expect them to increase the size of their contingent. To counteract the fallout from July's explosion of a weapons cache in Khirbet Selim, Murr planned consultations with his Italian defense ministry counterpart and with the Italian MFA

in September, before the GOI took a decision on its UNIFIL commitment. When the Ambassador asked about the status of the UNIFIL and Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) reports on the Khirbet Selim incident, Murr responded that they were not yet ready for release and hinted that the LAF report does not include a specific mention of Hizballah.

ISRAELI REPATRIATED THANKS TO URR

¶6. (C)Murr confided to us the curious case of an Israeli "soldier" who crossed the Blue Line and was taken into custody by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) earlier in the week. According to Murr, the Israeli did not provide any information other than his name, Igor Caghan (in Murr's spelling -- possibly Karan or Kagan), when he was questioned.

Reasoning that the incident could spiral out of control quickly given the current "political vacuum" and ongoing Lebanese investigations into Israeli spy networks in Lebanon, Murr ordered Caghan returned to Israel through the office of UNIFIL Commander General Graziano. A self-congratulatory Murr reported that Graziano had met with him earlier on August 28 to confirm Caghan's return and thank Murr for his cooperation. (Note: Despite news of the incident appearing in international press, the Lebanese media has not reported it at all. The Israeli press has claimed that Caghan is mentally challenged. End note.)

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Elias Murr's keen desire to remain a key interlocutor vis-a-vis UNSCR 1701 and to play a part in Lebanon's eventual

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participation in Middle East peace negotiations was clearly on display. His support for Hariri appeared unconditional, although Murr's influence on independent MPs took a hit on August 31, when Najib Mikati and Ahmad Karami, two key members of the "Tripoli bloc" of independent Sunni, opted not to attend the meeting of Majority MPs. Murr's concern that Hariri must follow the August 31 meeting with immediate, concrete proposals is nonetheless a sentiment echoed by our contacts from both the majority and the opposition.
SISON